

## Civil War Book Review

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## Feature Essay

### THOMAS WOLFE'S CIVIL WAR

Madden, David

Summer 2002

**Wolfe, Thomas** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Thomas Wolfe's Civil War.*

Two mythic achievements in the novel form have eluded the creative powers of both the greatest northern and southern writers: the Great American Novel and the Great Civil War Novel. I am convinced that the Great American Novel must also be the Great Civil War Novel. Thomas Wolfe, who wrote "Chickamauga", "The Four Lost Men", and scattered passages in his novels deliberately about the Civil War, is one of the best examples of a southern writer whose entire body of work is indirectly about the Civil War.

"The Four Lost Men", in *From Death to Mourning*, (Macmillan, 1983) has Wolfe's description of the effect of the advent of World War I on everyone serves to describe as well the Civil War's effect upon the South. "The war had got in everything: it was in things that moved, and in things that were still, in the animate red silence of an old brick wall as well as in the thronging life and traffic of the streets."

Had I world enough and time, I would try to support those claims, but space is limited. I will simply claim that "Chickamauga" and "The Four Lost Men" are among our finest Civil War short stories.

"Chickamauga", found in *The Hills Beyond* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807125679, \$17.95, softcover), is simple but unique in Civil War literature. Its achievement comes from its sthetic unity. The structure, four battles and the theme four, changes the war wrought in the characters' lives are perfectly meshed. This story has more obvious organization than any of Wolfe's other stories and most other first-person Civil War short stories.

In "The Four Lost Men", Wolfe resurrects his father's four dead Civil War heroes and thus to some extent his father, and instills in us a vision of all the lost men of all wars.

In contrast to the simple narrative of "Chickamauga", "The Four Lost Men" is a visionary, conceptualized fiction. It provides the kind of unique perspective on the Civil War that, amid the endless sameness of much writing about the war, we crave. It is an excruciatingly poignant meditation on the impossibility of experiencing events of great magnitude on a level commensurate with their scope, complexity, and implications. The urge to recover the unrecoverable, experience the ineffable, express what is too metaphysical for words struggles magnificently. By expressing a concept of the war and its lingering effects through implication, "The Four Lost Men" is the single greatest short story about the Civil War.

It is not that he wrote these stories but the way he wrote them, with masterful artistic skill, that persuades me Thomas Wolfe had the potential for writing the Great Civil War Novel. Indirectly, in the sense that everything a southern writer creates is about the Civil War, he did write about the Civil War. But only direct intention can produce the novel we all hanker for. One reviewer declared that *The Hills Beyond*, Wolfe's last book, "might have been the greatest realistic southern picture of Reconstruction Days." In the deepest sense, a novel about Reconstruction is a Civil War Novel. Perhaps a publisher will reprint that book in an edition that includes "Chickamauga" and a few related stories and passages from novels.

The fabled Great American Novel will have to be suffused with the Civil War, and only a southern writer is temperamentally capable of writing it. Of all the southern writers who died young, I am convinced that Thomas Wolfe could have written and probably would have written, that Great American Novel.

This article derived from a talk delivered at the Thomas Wolfe Conference at Gettysburg in May 1996 and published in *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, Fall 1997.

*David Madden is the author of three books on the Civil War, including a novel, Sharpshooter. He is co-editor of the Classics of Civil War Fiction series for the University of Alabama Press and Founding Director of the United States Civil War Center.*

